



## GENDER EQUALITY IN THE PROFESSION THERE'S STILL WORK TO BE DONE

BY ADRIAN D. THOMPSON

**Y**our CMBA has done it again: the association has put together yet another stellar program for Law Week, which will be on May 1–5, 2023, with the theme of “Cornerstones of Democracy: Civics, Civility, and Collaboration.”

Headlining the program will be Justice Maureen O'Connor, the 10th chief justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio. An icon in Ohio — and around the country — Justice O'Connor worked hard to improve fairness for all in the judicial system. Her accomplishments are long and include significant successes and work expanding access to justice in the state: she ushered in electronic filing at the Supreme Court. She provided our appellate courts with a modern case management system. And she committed more than \$40 million to local courts to enhance technology to provide greater access and reduce cost to litigants, defendants, and the public. Her foresight made Ohio a leader in its ability to continue court operations and the administration of justice through the pandemic and beyond.

Beyond her access to justice work, Justice O'Connor holds a unique distinction in Ohio history. When elected to Ohio's state Supreme Court in 2003, she became the first female chief justice of the court. It was a huge step forward for gender equality in the profession, confirming that a woman could lead the state's high court and that the citizens of Ohio wanted a woman leading theirs.

Gender equality is as relevant today as it was 20 years ago. As in other areas, the profession should lead the way to equitable treatment of women, providing opportunities, opening doors, and, more generally, setting the example of equity, inclusion, and diversity for all of our colleagues.

Since this month's *Bar Journal* focuses on Women in the Law, I asked several successful female colleagues for their perspectives. What challenges do women still face professionally? What advice would they give young women starting their careers in law? How can we all

address gender bias and other barriers to success? Here's what they had to say:



**Ashley Jones, Partner, Ashley Jones Law; and CMBF Director**

“Women still face challenges: not being taken seriously, being asked questions about our personal lives when male lawyers are not asked the same questions, being unfairly labeled as emotional, being mistaken for paralegals, court reporters, or clients — anyone other than the lawyer — just to mention a few. To be clear: all of these things have happened to me recently, so the steps we have taken in the past 20 years feel minuscule.

I have navigated these challenges by appropriately calling people out when necessary and never forgetting how someone treats me. I've also found my circle and tribe of women who will go to the mat with and for me.

The legal field can take steps to resolve these issues, such as inviting men to be transparent and open about mistakes they've made — or continue to make — instead of merely telling them to ask for forgiveness. The profession can and should call out bad behavior.

Making the environment fair for women in the profession is not women's problem to fix. And, frankly, we're tired of being asked to shoulder the responsibility of showing basic decency and respect on behalf of everyone. As women, we are here. We've always been here. We are waiting for genuine buy-in.”



**Renuka Raman, Corporate Counsel, Big Lots Stores; and CMBA Director**

“As a woman who was the first in her family to pursue a career in law, I knew early on that my legal journey would be challenging, and I had to stay persistent to achieve success. Fortunately, my father has been my biggest supporter throughout my career. While even today, women face challenges pursuing careers in law, there is also growing awareness

and intent to make the workplace more inclusive and equitable. To all aspiring women lawyers: follow your dreams and never give up.”



**Robin Wilson, Partner, Ulmer & Berne LLP; and CMBA Director**

“My advice to young female lawyers would be to find yourself a book of business. When determining what area of the law you want to practice, pick an area where you can specialize so that when someone needs an attorney in that area, they will think of you. Figure out what lights you up and learn everything about that area of the law. Take the time to market yourself early and pick up every speaking engagement or seminar offered to hone your experience of the law in that area. Look outward to build your client base and internally to people you work with to develop your knowledge and practice.

Have confidence in yourself and tell yourself you are worth the investment. Do good things for people, and help them when they need something (whether it is a recommendation or simply a listening ear). Be present. Lastly, even if you do none of the things I have suggested above, remember it is okay to change course along the way.”



**Leslie Johns, Partner, Ashley Jones Law**

“Women still face many of the same challenges we did 20 years ago. We're often overlooked for specific positions and face significant challenges breaking the glass ceiling for no reason other than being a woman in a male-dominated field.

Throughout my career, I have gravitated toward strong women leaders who look out for other women. The legal field in Cleveland has a genuinely supportive group of women professionals. I have also not been afraid to speak my mind about some of the challenges women face. Making it known that there should be more female leadership and filling some of those spaces has allowed me to meet the challenges head-on.



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I would encourage young women starting their careers in law to not be afraid to speak up and take up space. We have your back.

I think it's important to note that women can't do the work alone. We need our male colleagues to take an assertive role in leveling the playing field for women lawyers. We offer the same caliber of work and skills as our male counterparts. However, despite this, most law partners in Cleveland are white men. The people who hold most of the power need to be a strong force in changing the culture and leading the charge. We as women are doing all that we can, but we are often struggling to the top when we could easily be lifted up."

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Thank you, ladies, for your insight. As we strive for gender equality and equity in the profession, your leadership and guidance are invaluable. Now, let's get to work.

*Adrian Thompson is the president of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association and co-partner-in-charge of Taft's Cleveland office. He also serves as Taft's chief diversity officer and is president emeritus of the board of directors of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. He has been a CMBA member since 1991. He can be reached at (216) 706-3912 or [athompson@taftlaw.com](mailto:athompson@taftlaw.com).*

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